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ABSTRACT

Ethnographers find themselves among a family of researchers referred to as naturalists. This rather diverse family conducts research described by turns as qualitative, participant observational, case study, symbolic interactionist, phenomenological, constructivist, and interpretive. The focus of the ethnographer's inquiry is on the mundane, everyday practices of people. Social studies and ethnographic research would seem to go together naturally. What may be surprising is that social studies educators appear to be less willing than others in education to use field research techniques. In 1973, Shaver and Larkins argued that most of the research in social studies was being conducted by graduate students. There may be several reasons for the paucity of ethnographic studies of social studies classes or social studies teaching. Among these reasons are: (1) There is a disconcerting narrowness of scope in ethnographic design. (2) The research methodologies require a difficult, time-consuming set of procedures which, if not adhered to, lead to research of questionable value, and leave the researcher time for very little else. (3) Although classroom ethnographies provide rich descriptions, they present only a thin slice of school culture. (4) Host schools are entitled to protection, but pseudonyms and disguises cannot mask the school and those who earn a livelihood there from anyone who knew about the enterprise. (BZ)

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Ethnographic Scholarship and Social Education

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Social research, no matter what form it takes, is designed to produce information about human behavior that has truth and serves a useful purpose (see Pelto and Pelto, 1978, p.1). Some social researchers prefer to cloak themselves in a mantle of scientific obscurity pretending that they do not personally intrude upon their research and that their research is separate and distinct from their day-to-day lives. These researchers, not unlike the Vulcan scientist, Mr. Spock, of Star Trek fame, are unfailingly logical and emotionally neutral. No doubt, for these researchers, speaking about methodology is a dispassionate exercise.

For all other researchers, examining their choice of research method is an exercise in self-disclosure. The selection of a design from the research repertoire reveals how the researcher views society, what problems are seen as significant and worthwhile, and how the researcher goes about developing an understanding of his/her world. These investigators acknowledge that their research cannot be separated from the times in which they live or from their personal predilections. They admit - - sometimes grudgingly - - that the methods they use and the questions they ask are influenced not only by their intellectual curiosity but also by contemporaneous political and social climates (Kuhn, 1970) and by their personalities and predispositions (Polanyi, 1964).

I do educational ethnography. You know what that

says about me. I believe reality is socially constructed; I prefer the emic to the etic and the qualitative to the quantitative. Ethnographers find themselves among a family of researchers referred to as naturalists (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This rather diverse family conducts research described by turns as qualitiative, participant observational, case study, symbolic interactionist, phenomenological, constructivist and interpretive (Erickson, 1986, p.119). This may be a confusing array of terms, but it accurately refects the myriad of subgroups that embrace the methodology. The use of social science jargon also helps to allay one of their common fears: Ethnographic research may not be sufficiently obscure to be academically legitimate. After all, how much respect would be afforded researchers who defined their methodology as just "hanging-out" with a bunch of ordinary people describing and analyzing how they live their lives.

Drawn from the ranks of functionalists as well as from conflict theorists, naturalists share little in common but their opposition to quantitative methodology in the social sciences and the world view held by those who use those devices. <u>They</u> do research that tries to separate the knower from the known. <u>We</u> maintain that this is a misleading dualism; <u>we</u> celebrate the inevitable mutual influences of researcher and subject. <u>They</u> believe there is a single, isolable reality that can be studied scientif-

ically; we believe that there are multiple constructed realities in the social world that cannot be studied outside of their naturally occurring context. They believe in scientific detachment from the object of their inquiries; we believe no understanding of human behavior can be made without examining the social meanings that inform it. They like clean, discrete bits of social data; we delight in complexity, and celebrate the entangled webs of meaning found in everyday life. They don't invite us to their parties; we wouldn't enjoy drinking with them anyway.

Ethnographers tend to examine the ways in which groups of people live their lives, make sense out of their world, and seek to derive some measure of satisfaction from their daily experiences. The focus of the ethnographer's inquiry is on the mundane, everyday practices of people. The ethnographic perspective is that of a nonjudgmental visitor who enters a new group, wins the trust of his or her hosts, learns their view of the world, and empathically tells old friends what has been learned. As described in a recent essay, "(G)ood ethnography is an intellectual exorcism in which, forced to take the perspective of the other, we are wrenched out of our self. We transcend ourselves, and for a brief moment we wonder who we are, whether we are animals, barbarians or angels, whether all things are really the same under the sun, whether it would be better if the others were us, or better if we were the

other." (Schweder, 1986, p.39)

Among the social research methods, traditional ethnography (as practiced by Mead and Malinowski, for example) seems to be an especially intriguing way to collect data, and most of its practitioners appear to enjoy it. Spending long periods of time in primitive societies and suffering the relative privation of their subjects, traditional field researchers complain bitterly and darkly in their journals but unfailingly write upbeat ethnographies (see Malinowski,1967; Agar,1980). It is as though a goal of traditional anthropology is to report whatever optimism can be gleaned from the data of human experience; the genre renews our faith.

I don't do "traditional" ethnography, and I am uncomfortable with the term. It is not that I am opposed to "uplifting literature," but "traditional" implies a long history of pristine standards of research and a confining orthodoxy of belief among practitioners. It also suggests that those of us who work in other than primitive settings do not share in the same spirit of inquiry - - or worse, that we have misappropriated their designs. The history of ethnography as a research method clearly reflects little orthodoxy, and like other research techniques its evolution suggests refinements more than debasement. Recent criticisms of pioneering ethnographies (Freeman, 1983; Spiro,) do not demean the enterprise, but suggest that there is no

sin in deviating from the traditional, and no reason to be self-conscious about well-designed ethnographies conducted in familiar settings (see Whyte, 1943; Cusick, 1973; Palonsky, 1986).

While they may be less exotic than "traditional" field studies, school ethnographies are not necessarily frivolous or unlikely to produce true and useful information. In fact, in those instances in which we are interested in the perspective of key actors in school settings -- administrators, teachers, students -- ethnography may be the most desirable form of inquiry.

Social studies and ethnographic research would seem to go together naturally. Among those interested in conducting field research in education, social educators would be likely to have the greatest familiarity with the literature of sociology and anthropology. Social studies educators are prominent among those advocating the use of post-positivist research paradigms. Some of the better ethnographies have been written by social studies educators (see White, 1985) and one of the most useful books on ethnographic research methods boasts a social studies educator as first author. What may be surprising is that social studies educators appear to be less willing than others in education to use field research techniques (Armento, 1986).

In 1973, Shaver and Larkins, reporting on social studies research in the Second Handbook of Research on

Teaching, painted a less than sanguine picture of the field. They argued that most of the research in social studies was being conducted by graduate students. Attributing an absence of cumulative findings, in part, to atheoretical orientations toward research, they urged social studies educators to consider classroom ethnography as a "viable alternative for theory generation (in social education)" (p.1255). Thirteen years later, Armento, writing in the third edition of the Handbook (1986) finds little to refute Shaver and Larkins. (Who says we don't have cumulative findings?) Her review links most social studies research to doctoral dissertations, and the vast majority of the research is still ajudged to be excessively atheortical. Although she is not able to find very much literature to report, Armento optimistically refers to the ethnographic perspective as "an emerging research focus" in social studies education.

In 1985, Jane White reviewed ethnographic research studies and evaluated the extent to which they inform issues of social studies curriculum and instruction. She focused her review on three regularly recurring problems for social educators: How can we account for the stability of textbook/discussion methods? How do teachers control students and get them to work; and how do we explain classroom success and failure? (p.217).

White's review of the literature is thorough, and

she presents a convincing argument for the power of ethnographic research to produce knowledge. However, the extent to which these research findings can inform social studies practice is arguable. White blends findings from so-called macro and micro ethnographies without adequate attention to the significant differences in these designs, and she she seems insufficiently cautious about combining conclusions from studies written from socially conserving functionalist perspectives with studies by critical theorists. Of greater concern is that most of the ethnographies cited in the review were not conducted in social studies classes.

To what extent can the findings of ethnographic studies conducted outside of social studies classes inform social studies practice? Cathy Cornbleth has convinced us that "thinking" and the assessment of that thinking are situation dependent (Cornbleth, 1985, 1986). Cornbleth has argued that thinking in social studies differs from thinking in science and that a student's analysis of a social problem is not the same as that student's analysis of a chemistry problem. Each area of knowledge has its own logic and criteria for acceptable thinking and problem solving skills (1985, p.22).

Other researchers report subject by subject variations in classroom practices. One observational study, for example, (Stodolsky, 1981), comparing fifth grade math and social studies lessons, found differences in the length of seatwork

assignments, and the quality and character of recitations and group work projects. The nature of the subject matter, as interpreted by the teacher, required different classroom activities for the students and different roles. Variations in the nature of thinking across subject areas, as well as differences in the teaching strategies and activities used to bring about subject specific thinking greatly reduce the power of studies to inform teaching across the disciplines. The most important knowledge about the teaching of social studies will be found primarily in social studies classes.

However, one cannot fault Prof. White for being forced to go beyond social studies ethnographies. A reviewer searching for ethnographic studies of social studies classes or social studies teaching is struck by the paucity of such investigations. As has been noted by others, (including White) social studies researchers appear to do more talking about ethnography than ethnography.

Why is so little ethnographic research conducted by social educators? (A colleague suggests that social studies people are simply too sophisticated to be a slave to new, unproved research fashion, and they stick to traditional methods rather than risk being labeled "Zeitgeister shysters.")

This may be so, but let me suggest some other reasons, and re-examine the potential for ethnography contributing

to social studies education.

1. For many researchers - - and perhaps for many of those interested in social studies research - - there is a disconcerting narrowness of scope in ethnographic designs. If the goal of an academic field is to develop a set of general laws that can be applied to all cases and all times, ethnography is not the answer. Ethnographies are admittedly idiographic bodies of knowledge. While a well-crafted field study might explain the behavior of a particular group - - for example, social studies teachers - - it does so for those teachers, during one time period, while they work with a specific mix of students. The extent to which the conclusions of one study are applicable to other sites is a matter of contention. Some researchers argue that basic similarities in the culture of teaching transcend specific differences in settings. One teacher will understand another's behavior because of shared cultural traits created by the common conditions of their employment. The value of the research rests in the insights and understandings it brings to those within the culture. (If the ethnographic product helps others who share that culture better understand their world, the research enterprise was worthwhile). Other researchers claim that ethnographies are designed to generate theory and hypotheses for future investigation. Anything beyond

cultural description, they argue, is arbitrary and simplistic. Go into a school, they advise, muck about and uncover some relationships for numbers crunchers and survey scientists to examine.

No matter which of these polls they find attractive, few field researchers would argue that ethnographic studies of schools are likely to find their way into future editions of William J. Bennett's pamphlet "What Works" or the National Council's How-to-do-it series. Ethnographies are not designed to produce simple, generalizable answers to questions about methodology or school discipline or student motivation.

2. School ethnographies require a difficult time-consuming set of procedures which, if not adhered to, lead to research of questionable value, and if followed scrupulously leave the researcher time for very little else. (Ethnographic designs in education have been discussed by Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Dobbert (1982), Goetz and Le Compte (1984), and Spindler (1982) among others.) The fundamental rationale for ethnography rests in the assumption that social behavior must be understood from the perspective of the participant. The ways that social realities are created and maintained must be observed in the setting in which those behaviors naturally occur and explained from the participant's point of view. Because the basic validity criterion of field research is the "immediate and local meanings of actions"

- - so-called insider accounts of behavior - - field studies require extensive participation in the daily lives of the respondents (Erickson, 1986; p. 119). Phenomena must be observed repeatedly before they can be considered other than social anomalies, and the knowledge that the participants use to guide their behavior must be observed in context and under varied circumstances.

Ethnography cannot be not a part-time enterprise. It is not possible to limit ethnographic studies to Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays unless respondents can be coerced into suspending their social lives on other days. In order for the researcher to examine the rules subjects use to govern and interpret their behavior, the research must extend continuously over a meaningful interval.

What is that interval? For an ethnography of hunter-gatherers who follow game and change dwelling sites with the seasons, one sequence of wet and dry periods might be minimally sufficient to observe a full range of behaviors. An ethnography of social studies teachers would also require that the researcher observe a complete range of teacher behaviors. Because teachers behave differently in September than in June, and because Mondays are not the same as Fridays, and because snow days, prom days, band days, and days just before and just after vacations are all different, an ethnographic study of teaching requires at least one academic year of full-time participant observ-

ation.

This is a tremendous time committment, and no doubt it discourages many would-be ethnographers. (A related but by no means trivial consideration is that only one publication, typically an extended monograph, is likely to eventuate from this type of study. For those of you who have been cursed with deans who demand that you publish three data based articles a year, ethnography could be a problematic methodology.)

3. (Selection of a unit of analysis.)

The researcher needs to define a meaningful unit of analysis that will account for the behavior of his/her subjects. This was not a problem for traditional ethnographers. Small tribal units typically composed of hierarchically-ordered interacting members are ideal. Selection of an appropriate unit for school ethnographers is a nightmare. Characterized by isolated, and often, uncommunicative personnel, schools can be regarded as cultural sites in which all of the major actors - - teachers, administrators, board members and various student groups - - simultaneously construct separate realities. In despair, some researchers have abandoned the school as a unit of analysis in favor of individual classrooms. The classroom is manageable, and during the school day it is an ecologically bounded unit that can be considered a site of cultural production.

(This may be more true for the elementary school than the secondary school). However, classroom ethnographies are deficient in several aspects (see Wax and Wax, 1979; Goetz and Le Compte, 1984). If researchers do not follow the students or teachers outside of the classroom, they cannot be sure of the extent to which classroom behaviors are continuous or discontinuous with other school behaviors, and classroom ethnographers are unable to determine whether they have stumbled onto an isolated classroom event or a typical cultural pattern. Although classroom ethnographies provide rich descriptions, they present only a thin slice of school culture 'that may be insufficient to account for the range of human interactions and the creation of a social reality.

4. (Researchers' role and responsibility.)

A long established ethos among field workers demands protection for the hosts. Traditional ethnographies were not intended to benefit the subject, but they were designed to do them no harm. Anthropologists conducting research among nonliterate, remote populations need not be concerned about the effects their writing will have on their hosts. The subjects are unlikely to have access to the product of the research. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the work of educational ethnographers wil find its way to those who had extended courtesies and revealed intimacies. Pseudonyms and disguises cannot mask the school

and those who earn a livelihood in them from anyone who knew about the enterprise (students, board members and the community.) At the very least, subjects can be held up to public inspection. (None of us relishes the idea of having our idiosyncracies described in print.) At the worst it presents a potentially inaccurate portrait of the school to which they cannot respond.

School ethnography serves ends that are in some ways similar and in some ways distinct from traditional ethnography. While they share a common goal of producing true and useful information, school ethnographers have a special set of responsibilities. School ethnographers are typically educators with a shared responsibility for the enterprise they are examining. The phenomena they study - - a constellation of behaviors and attitudes referred to as schooling - - is everywhere under attack, and ethnographers cannot be satisified producing true information that is useful only to the academic community, (as difficult as that is). The ethnographer, examining schooling from the perspective of the participants, develops insights and understandings that should be of local use, and there is an obligation to share that information. It is not sufficient to turn ethnographic data into scholarly articles and monographs without providing the school with direct benefit from the research. The school ethnographer has an obligation to intervene in the culture; to use school personnel as

co-researchers; and to recommend and help implement changes and address problems suggested by the study. While this is unthinkable for the traditional ethnographer, to do less is, for the school ethnographer, an act of irresponsibility.

School ethnography is a difficult, time-consuming research approach. Although the methodology has not been used extensively in social studies it cannot be discounted. Appropriately designed, school ethnography can be the method of choice for those social studies educators who want to do academic research that has the potential payoff of helping schools and teachers. Social educators should join with ethnographers from other disciplines to examine the school and the nature of teaching from varied perspectives (e.g., social studies, mathematics, educational administration). Research teams composed of experienced ethnographers, graduate students and public school teachers could use the school as a unit of analysis and provide a valid longitudinal dimension to the study (without requiring all researchers to be in the school at all times). The ethnographic product will produce subject specific knowledge that will be of use to teachers and information about the culture of the school that could be useful to the school.

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